

Current Challenges and Continuing Relevance of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Considering Mali as a Case-Study¹

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Introduction. The Women, Peace and Security agenda

The United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was inaugurated in 2000 with the unanimous adoption of the Security Council landmark resolution 1325. This resolution, together with the ones that followed², described as a “norm bundle”, are a crucial framework to address the unique ways in which women and girls are affected by conflict and to promote their protection and participation in the maintenance of peace and security, in conflict prevention and post-conflict efforts. However, despite the headway that has been made over the past 20 years, there are several current challenges highlighting the need to make the agenda a living instrument that evolves and effectively adapts to the rapid changes of the world.

Critiques and challenges to the implementation of the WPS agenda

A first reading of the 10 WPS resolutions adopted so far reveals a consistent resolve to strengthen women’s participation and representation in a wide range of conflict-related stages. Underlying such need to strengthen female representation is indeed symptomatic of the will to reconsider women not merely as *victims* but also as *actors* in addressing and resolving conflict scenarios. However, feminist law scholars³ have highlighted how a careful reading also reveals an absence of women’s political rights language: in fact, although a general concern about women’s under-representation is expressed, resolution 1325, for instance, does not follow the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in concretely urging the *equal* representation of women. Accordingly – as scholars have argued – WPS resolutions do acknowledge some of the obstacles in women’s participation within decision-making processes (e.g. violence, intimidation, stigmatization) but fail to formulate adequate policies to address the fundamental reasons of women’s exclusion, namely structural inequalities and gender discrimination.

Feminist law scholars have pointed out that social and economic rights language is largely absent from the WPS resolutions as well⁴. There is rarely an explicit reference to the right to education, the right to work, the right to health or the right to equal participation in economic and social life. Instead

¹ The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and positions of the United Nations and UNICRI, or any other national, regional or international entity involved.

² Namely resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019) and 2493 (2019).

³ See, for instance, Lourdes Peroni, *Women’s human rights in conflict: The WPS Agenda twenty years on*, Questions of International Law, 31 October 2020.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

– unless they refer to victims/survivors – the WPS resolutions tend to speak of general “services”, “support”, and “assistance”. Having said that, in this field there has been a remarkable shift over time from a narrow, liberal understanding of women’s condition towards a comprehensive and intersectional approach. In fact, resolution 2122 (2013) called for an approach that integrates political, security, development and human rights dimensions and, in 2019, resolution 2493 underscored the need to protect all women’s human rights, including civil, political and economic rights.

Another element to be mentioned, hindering an adequate implementation of the agenda, is a general lack of data and research on the specific impact of conflict on women and girls, which makes it difficult to understand the full extent of the challenges they face and to develop effective strategies to counter and prevent these effects. Additionally, there is a lack of women in leadership and decision-making positions worldwide⁵, which limits the ability of women to raise awareness and advocate for their own rights and needs.

Furthermore, as denoted by UN Women, although resolution 1325 “urges Member States to increase their voluntary *financial*, technical and logistical support for gender-sensitive training efforts”, the failure to allocate sufficient resources and funds has been perhaps the most serious and persistent obstacle to the implementation of the agenda⁶. This has resulted in a lack of progress in many areas and a weakened ability of the UN and its Member States to fully support and empower women in conflict-affected areas. This is also why the WPS agenda is too often considered a secondary or supplementary subject, rather than a central part of peace and security efforts⁷.

Some observers have also criticised the general theoretical architecture of the WPS agenda. Rather than merely *including* women into existing structures and processes, some analysts suggest that the WPS agenda should strive to *transform* the international system. Others have noticed how efforts to strengthen women’s participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction should identify a variety of different non-violent forms of female political agency, not only limited to institutional/governmental decision-making, but rather extended to informal/non-governmental and other forms of activism⁸.

A recent development. The association of the WPS agenda with the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) and further critiques

Building upon the initial developments of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and given the need of “a renewed and sustained focus on prevention⁹” of violent extremism across the globe, WPS

⁵ According to UN Women, between 1992 and 2019, women were, on average, 13 per cent of negotiators, 6 per cent of mediators, and 6 per cent of signatories in major peace processes worldwide. About seven out of every ten peace processes did not include any women mediators or women signatories. Available from: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures#_Womens_participation (lastly visited on 24 February 2023).

⁶ UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace. A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, 2015.

⁷ See also Laura Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton, *The three key challenges facing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, The Gender Security Project, 22 October 2020.

⁸ Nicola Pratt and Sophie Richter-Devroe, *Women, Peace and Security: New Conceptual Challenges and Opportunities*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, February 2013.

⁹ UN Secretary-General António Guterres remarks during the Regional High-Level Conference on Counter Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism in Africa, July 2019.

resolutions have started dedicating a prominent – though debated upon – focus on addressing the specific challenges faced by women in the context of violent extremism. Indeed, since 2015 the resolutions on Women, Peace and Security have increasingly included considerations on the condition of women exposed to threats or subjected to violent extremism. Resolution 2242 (2015) recognizes the important role and calls for the meaningful participation of women in all preventing and countering violent extremism efforts. It also calls for the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence in the context of violent extremism, and for the inclusion of a gender perspective in P/CVE efforts. Resolution 2331 (2016) reinforces these commitments and calls for the inclusion of a gender perspective in all programming and for the provision of targeted support to women and girls affected by violent extremist ideology. Finally, resolution 2493 (2019) stresses the need to address the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of women and girls and emphasizes the importance of education in preventive efforts, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as means to build resilience against extremist ideologies.

On one side, some activists, practitioners and scholars have welcomed the recognition of women as agents in the fight against terrorism. On the other side, some feminist scholars have criticized the merging of these two agendas at the international level, alleging that the UN policy agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) would be co-opting the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. In so doing, while proposing to use women's participation as a tool to fight terrorism, the WPS agenda is considered to be prescribing a dominant, essentializing, reductive role for women as “new security actors”¹⁰, namely as caring, competent and peace-loving counsellors, influencers and informers, mainly engaged in preventive efforts and in the familial and private sphere. Some observers therefore criticize the effect of prescribing women's roles in the fight against violent extremism in association with a traditional notion of *femininity*.

The specificities of the Sahel and of the Republic of Mali

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges to the WPS agenda, observers¹¹ have remarked how a single approach to a multiplicity of cases might be misleading: the WPS agenda should, instead, be oriented to develop specific tools for Member States to be better prepared to identify the context-specific, structural causes of conflict with the ultimate objective of formulating more effective policies. This is relevant, for instance, to the specific case of the Sahel, which presents a vulnerable context in terms of peace, security, gender equality and escalating levels of conflict and violent extremism in recent years. In fact, Giovannie Biha, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), recently spoke of “unprecedented levels of security and humanitarian challenges”¹². In this context, Mali is among those States most seriously affected by instability and violence, as the country has been embroiled in armed conflict since the outbreak of the *coup d'état* in 2012, when Jihadist groups began to fight against the Malian government, seeking independence for northern

¹⁰ Jenny Lorenzten, *Women as “New Security Actors” in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Mali*, *International Affairs*, 97, 3, 2021, pp. 721–738.

¹¹ Pratt and Richter-Devroe, *Women, Peace and Security: New Conceptual Challenges and Opportunities*, cit., p. 3.

¹² UN News, ‘Unprecedented’ insecurity in West Africa and the Sahel, *Security Council hears*, 10 January 2023, available from: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132332> (lastly visited on 20 January 2023).

regions of the country. During the occupation of these regions, some cities such as Sévaré, Bankass, Koro and Bandiagara faced a massive influx of large populations, mostly women and children, creating a humanitarian crisis and a breeding ground for the spread of violent extremism¹³. Evidence from the last 10 years of unsolved destabilization shows how women have been disproportionately and adversely affected by the crisis, with their rights and freedoms being severely curtailed by the ongoing violence.

One of the most significant ways in which the conflict in Mali has impacted women is the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, with women being subjected to rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of abuse and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by both sides of the conflict. The prevalence of these crimes has reportedly increased as the conflict has escalated and has had a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of women in the country¹⁴. In addition, domestic violence is prevalent in Mali, with many women being subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by their partners. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is also prevalent and seen as a means to control women's sexuality and reproduction; according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the practice affects more than 70 per cent of girls in the country¹⁵. Despite being identified as a fundamental violation of human rights by international law, this practice remains rooted in cultural and religious beliefs and is further exacerbated in times of conflict, with many women and girls being forced to undergo the procedure against their will¹⁶.

The example of Mali emphasizes the critical relevance of safeguarding the right to health and especially of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) in women's livelihoods during armed conflict, when access is either denied or restricted. Indeed, nearly 70 per cent of rural Mali women give birth at home, with a significant number of maternal and new-born deaths occurring within 48 hours after delivery, and only two per cent of women use hormonal contraceptives¹⁷. Restricted access to contraception and the rise in maternal and child mortality rates are associated with the country's poor health care services and infrastructures and the high cost of quality health services, aspects further negatively impacted by ongoing conflict¹⁸. In addition, women in Mali face high risks of contracting diseases, including sexually transmitted infections, due to the lack of access to preventive measures and quality health care¹⁹. Discourse around women's health therefore remains a fundamental challenge.

¹³ Ahmed S. Hashim, *The War in Mali: Islamists, Tuaregs and French Intervention*, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 5, 2, February 2013, pp. 2-8.

¹⁴ International Peace Institute (IPI), *Providing Healthcare in Armed Conflict: The Case of Mali*, January 2019.

¹⁵ UNICEF, *Children in Mali. Mali's greatest resource is its children*, available from: <https://www.unicef.org/mali/en/children-mali> (lastly visited on 20 January 2023).

¹⁶ See, for instance, this report published by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in June 2020 – titled *Inquiry concerning Mali under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* – stating that millions of women and girls in Mali are subjected to “grave and systematic violations of rights” through FGM. Available from: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2F%20C%2FIR%2F%2F%2F1&Lang=en (lastly visited on 24 February 2023).

¹⁷ Filio Degni, Ibrahim D. Amara and Reija Klemetti, *Women's Experiences in Accessing Maternal and Child Health Services During the Period of the Armed Conflict in the North of Mali*, *The Open Public Health Journal*, 8, pp. 17-22, 2015.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁹ International Peace Institute (IPI), *Providing Healthcare in Armed Conflict: The Case of Mali*, cit., pp. 6-7.

The deterioration in Mali has also had a detrimental effect on the economic status of the population, particularly of women. The conflict has disrupted traditional livelihoods and markets, making it difficult for women to access resources, employment and other income-generating opportunities. Many women are forced to flee their homes and communities, leaving behind their farms, businesses and other assets. Displacement limits their ability to provide for themselves and their families and has increased their vulnerability to extremist ideologies as well as their dependence on aid and assistance. Additionally, the security situation in many areas of the country remains unstable, which makes it difficult for women to travel and engage in economic and social activities, thus eroding their economic and social capital²⁰.

The conflict has negatively impacted youth's access to education as well. Because of widespread displacement, for many children – regardless of their gender – it has become difficult to attend schools, which are often destroyed or damaged and with teachers forced to flee their homes, leading to a shortage of education personnel. However, girls are disproportionately affected as they are more likely than boys to be forced to drop out of school in order to take care of their families or to be forced into early marriages. The conflict has also led to a rise in child labour for boys and girls, which has further limited their access to quality education. Indeed, according to a survey conducted in the field in 2017²¹, access to education ranks among the five top priorities for communities in Mali.

The context taken into consideration even represents a significant example of women's hindered ability to participate in political decision-making processes: displacement and violence have made it difficult for them to engage in civic participation, political activities or run for office and for women's organizations to operate and advocate for women's rights²². Moreover, several elements tied to cultural and societal constraints, such as illiteracy, unwanted pregnancies, domestic obligations and limited freedom of movement are crucial. Even though the government formed in September 2018 included 11 female ministers (out of a total of 33 ministers), the first female Minister of Foreign Affairs and a female Minister of Employment, in the following government reshuffle the ratio was once again reduced to eight female ministers out of 36. Accordingly, the number of women in political office in Mali has remained low, leaving their voices unheard and concerns unaddressed.

The Malian landscape exemplifies the under-participation of women in peacekeeping operations as well. Despite efforts to increase the deployment of female soldiers, the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) remains dominated by men: of 11,000 troops, only 1.8 per cent of military personnel are women compared to the average of 3.8 per cent for UN peacekeeping missions²³. Indeed, although, in 2016, MINUSMA recruited a senior gender advisor to coordinate gender mainstreaming efforts across the mission and support the implementation of UNSC resolution 1325, considerable challenges in gender mainstreaming within peacekeeping worldwide persist.

The deterioration in Mali is aggravated by communities' grievances exploited by violent extremist groups, which make use of appealing propaganda messages and attract the participation of men, youth

²⁰ Zoe Gorman and Grégory Chauzal, *A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali*, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, 6, November 2019, p. 14.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 8.

²² See, for instance, Jessica Gottlieb, *Why Might Information Exacerbate the Gender Gap in Civic Participation? Evidence from Mali*, *World Development*, 86, October 2016, Pages 95-110.

²³ Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, Peter Albrecht and Rikke Haugegaard, *Female Peacekeepers are Vital for the Mission in Mali*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016.

and even women who often take the role of direct or indirect supporters rather than fighters. The driving factors in women's support to Malian violent extremist militias are reportedly religion – mentioned as the primary factor for women to join jihadist groups – followed by physical protection and economic security. Social pressure is a noteworthy driver, as well as forced or consensual marriage within armed militias. These indicators can play a role at both individual and community levels and may vary according to the diversity of contexts, the leadership of local structures as well as the ethnic belonging (e.g. gender roles greatly vary between Tuareg women, holding a remarkable influence in the family, and the Bambara populations in southern Mali in which women hold more traditional roles)²⁴. In general, providing goods and supplies, marrying into armed groups, contributing economic services and encouraging family members to join are the most common roles associated with women in armed groups²⁵.

Conclusions. Continuing Relevance of the WPS agenda

Like all conflicts, the situation in Mali is a paradigmatic example of the profound impact of armed conflict and violence on the condition of women in the country, with their rights and freedoms being severely impacted. In fact, although the Malian government adopted the *National Action Plan (NAP) on the UN Security Council resolution 1325* in 2013 as well as the *NAP to Prevent and Combat Violent Extremism and Terrorism* in 2018, their implementation remains limited and progress towards gender equality faces significant resistance, while studies confirm that young girls and women are respectively the first and second category most grievously affected by the conflict²⁶.

This is why the WPS agenda – despite challenges and problematic aspects – remains a crucial tool to address the unique challenges faced by ordinary women and girls in conflict-affected areas. The agenda has, in fact, had the unquestionable virtue of having made *gender* a central element in the discussion on international humanitarian and security affairs. The expansive and ambitious nature of the agenda has allowed its evolution over the last 20 years and its important shift to a more intersectional understanding of women's condition, and from a focus on *gender balancing* – i.e. increasing the number of women in a given role, in a way that approaches parity – to *gender mainstreaming* – i.e. integrating a gender perspective into the activities of an organization, thereby institutionalizing an understanding of the myriad ways in which gender matters²⁷. After over two decades since its inauguration, the WPS framework has been gradually gaining recognition, which has led to broad debates about its role and to the participation of more women in (post) conflict processes, as well as to the creation of initiatives such as the *Women, Peace, and Security Index*, which ranks countries based on their commitment to the WPS agenda.

Yet, it is still imperative that the international community works to increasingly enhance the understanding of, raise awareness on, consistently safeguard as well as empower women's condition

²⁴ See, for the specifics of this research on Mali, Gorman and Chauzal, *A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali*, cit., pp. 15-18.

²⁵ On women's roles in violent extremism, see, *inter alia*, UNICRI, International Alert, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*, July 2020.

²⁶ Gorman and Chauzal, *A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali*, cit., p. 11.

²⁷ Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, *The futures past of the Women, Peace and Security agenda*, International Affairs, 92, 2, March 2016, pp. 373-392.

in conflict and violent extremist scenarios around the world, in order to ensure that women are able to live with dignity and security in any corner of the globe.

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